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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001324

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/24/2019
TAGS: [KISL](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: SIX MONTHS LATER, RED CROSS HOSTAGE STILL HELD BY
TERRORIST GROUP

REF: MANILA 985 (ICRC HOSTAGE: 100 DAYS AND COUNTING)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney,
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Nearly six months after his January 15 kidnapping by the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group on Jolo Island, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) worker Eugenio Vagni remains captive despite recent aggressive military operations that have tightened the cordon around Abu Sayyaf members believed to be holding the Italian national in the southwest of the island. Reliable reports earlier this month indicated that Vagni is still alive, though likely still suffering from a hernia and hypertension. The Ambassador in a June 19 meeting assured the concerned ICRC Head of Delegation that the U.S. would continue to provide significant logistical support on the ground in Jolo, but cautioned him that legal constraints limited the role of U.S. forces on Philippine soil. The Ambassador and the ICRC official agreed about the need to keep pressure on the Philippine government to stay focused on Vagni's safe release, especially as senior officials become increasingly distracted with other issues, such as campaigning for the upcoming 2010 national elections. END SUMMARY.

HOSTAGE STILL IN CAPTIVITY

¶2. (C) International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) worker Eugenio Vagni, an Italian national, remains a hostage of the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) almost six months after his January 15 kidnapping on Jolo Island. Two fellow ICRC workers also kidnapped alongside Vagni were later freed: Filipina ICRC worker Mary Jean Lacaba was released on April 2, and Swiss national Andreas Notter was abandoned April 17 by his captors during a night move while under pressure from government forces. The 62-year-old Vagni is believed to still be suffering from a hernia and hypertension. In early June, the Philippine government confirmed that Vagni was still alive, but gave no indication about any change in the state of his health. Regional police official Jose Gucela speculated June 21 that Vagni would not be harmed by his captors, as he was "the only leverage to prevent a full-scale offensive." However, Gucela admitted the government had no contact from Vagni since a phone call to his wife in early June.

ISOLATING THE ASG

¶3. (C) The Philippine military continues to conduct

successful pursuit operations against the ASG, isolating them in a mountainous area in southwest Jolo and employing "decisive engagements" rather than "attritional attacks," according to Philippine Marines Commandant Maj. Gen. Benjamin Dolorfino. Another military official, anti-terrorism Task Force Chief Maj. Gen. Juancho Sabban, offered assurances that the military isolated Vagni's captors -- an ASG group led by Abu Pula -- in a fierce June 11 encounter with government military forces and special police units. Sabban noted the success of military operations in preventing the escape of ASG leaders Albader Parad and Yasser Igassan to their home territory near Patikul town, and in stopping ASG reinforcements from reaching Vagni's captors. On June 21, press reports noted, another clash left four ASG members dead and two soldiers injured, raising the total number of deaths during rescue operations to eight for the military and 15 for ASG.

LOSING CONTACT WITH VAGNI

¶4. (C) ICRC officials continue their public appeal to Vagni's captors for his immediate and unconditional release, and are increasingly concerned they have lost contact with Vagni since his June 12 phone call to his wife, who has been brought by ICRC officials to an undisclosed location in Jolo to be nearer to her husband. During a June 19 meeting with ICRC Head of Delegation Jean-Daniel Tauxe, who sought additional U.S. support to monitor the hostage situation, the Ambassador assured Tauxe that the U.S. was already providing significant logistical support on the ground in Jolo and

MANILA 00001324 002 OF 002

would continue to do so. However, the Ambassador cautioned Tauxe that provisions in a U.S.-Philippine bilateral agreement, as well as the Philippine Constitution, specifically prohibited U.S. forces from participating in combat operations on Philippine soil. Mindful of the limitations on U.S. involvement, Tauxe expressed his sincere appreciation to the Ambassador for the support provided by U.S. forces and for their willingness to communicate with ICRC officials in Jolo.

NO RANSOM PAID

¶5. (C) At great length, Tauxe emphasized to the Ambassador that the ICRC had not paid any ransom to the kidnappers. Rumors and Philippine and foreign government assertions to the contrary were false; Australian, Canadian, and French officials had all accused the ICRC of succumbing to the ASG's demand for ransom, but Tauxe said the ICRC categorically refuted those accusations. He implored the Ambassador to help dispel these notions. The ICRC, he said, was also certain that neither the Swiss government nor Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronaldo Puno had paid any ransom, as some observers of the hostage crisis had speculated. ICRC officials were also "nearly 100 percent certain" that the Italian government had not paid ransom -- despite its reputation for doing so in kidnapping situations. Those who truly wanted to help Vagni, Tauxe concluded, would not be willing to pay any amount. The Ambassador said she hoped that the Italians had not paid; as an ally in the war on terrorism, the Italian government would understand that paying terrorists was counterproductive and could lead to additional kidnappings.

GOVERNMENT MUST COORDINATE AND FOCUS

¶6. (C) Tauxe, who was confident that Vagni was still alive, expressed his concern to the Ambassador about the lack of coordination between the Philippine military and police, which could complicate negotiations with the ASG as well as any possible rescue operation. The Ambassador agreed that, although communication among military and law enforcement

units on the ground was sometimes lacking, coordination at senior levels of the Philippine government had improved in recent weeks. The Philippine government, the Ambassador noted, was capable of crafting and executing a viable rescue strategy, but the government needed to focus on the task and avoid distractions. Pressure on the government from all sides, including from the ICRC, the Ambassador offered, would be increasingly important to keep key leaders engaged, especially with anticipated absences by presidential hopeful Defense Secretary Teodoro and Secretary Puno, who was planning personal travel to the U.S.

COMMENT

17. (C) Tauxe's visit to the Ambassador -- his second since the kidnapping, on top of his regular phone calls to the Ambassador -- reflects the ICRC's growing concern and frustration about the lack of progress six months into the hostage situation, and is a sign that the ICRC does not yet have full confidence in the ability of the Philippine security forces to plan and conduct a successful rescue operation. Sensing Tauxe's unease about the situation, the Ambassador assuaged some of his concerns by noting improvements in the Philippine government's coordination and by offering continued U.S. support and vigilance. The Ambassador further urged Tauxe to listen cautiously to rumors circulating on Jolo about the ASG's plans and Vagni's circumstances, since it is extremely difficult to discern fact from fiction, and the motives of people who propagate rumors are usually unknown.

KENNEY